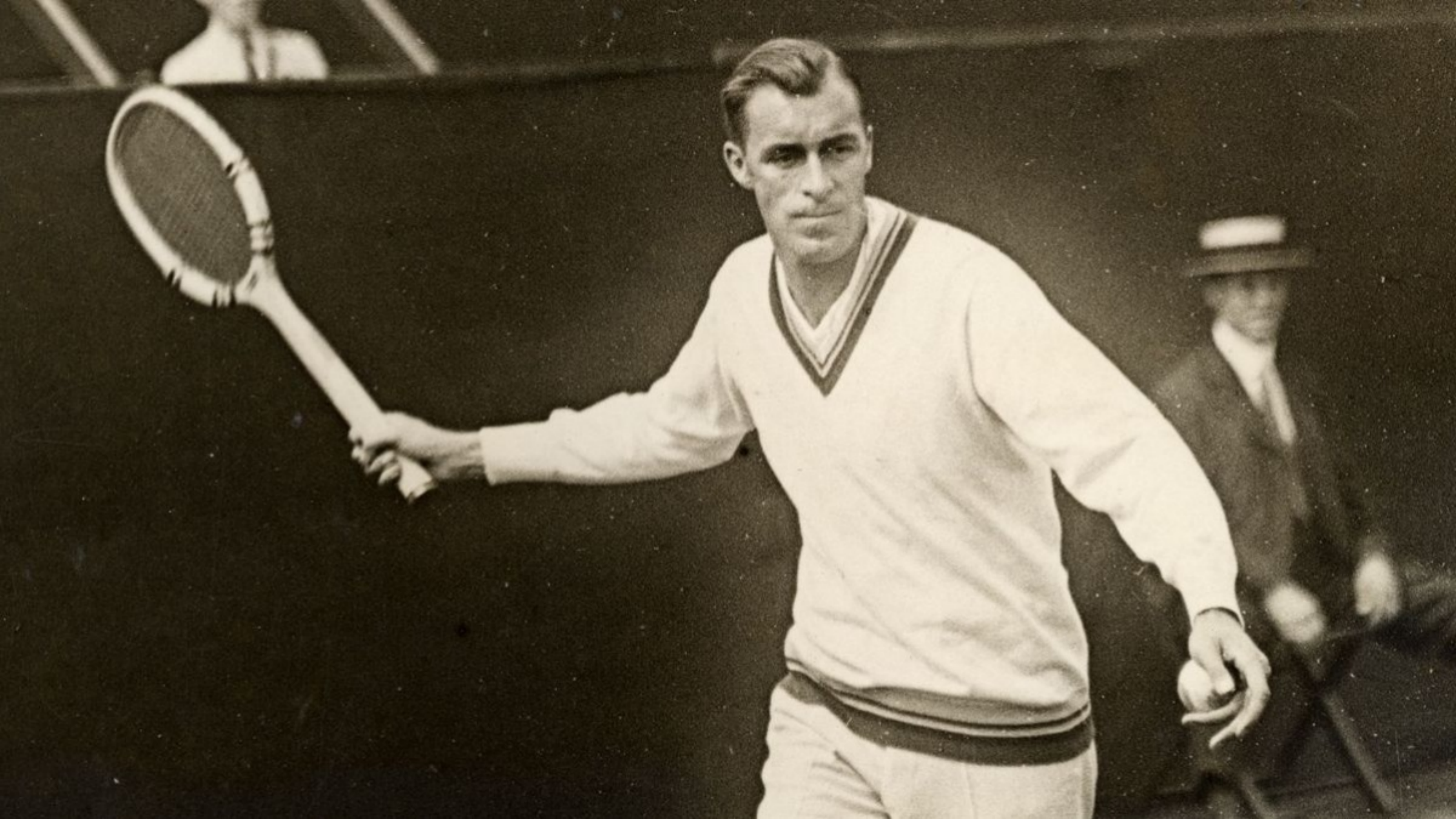


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Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 & 1949

An Unlikely Champion

No one who knew Tilden growing up would have picked him as a future super-athlete. He was a sickly child whose mother kept him out of school and tutored him at home. The Tildens had another son, Herbert, six years older. Herbert was a sturdy, handsome and outgoing boy who delighted his handsome, outgoing father. But Tilden Senior left the raising of his skinny younger son strictly to his wife. Linie Tilden constantly lectured little Bill on health, and especially, on the danger of venereal disease. He seldom saw children his own age. As a teenager, he hung around with younger boys and girls. He loved to play big brother, entertaining the other kids with stories and producing plays. He adored his own big brother, Herbert, an intercollegiate doubles champion, who taught him tennis.



Bill Tilden, holding USTA national championship challenge trophy, 1929.

(Bettmann/Corbis)

In 1911, while young Bill was at the University of Pennsylvania, his mother had a stroke and died. Four years later, both his father and brother died. Bill Tilden sank into a deep depression.

An older cousin told him to get interested in something, anything, or he'd waste his whole life. He became interested in tennis and began to study the game seriously. He studied opponents, too. He pinpointed their weaknesses and worked out strategies to deal with each. He combined this intellectual approach with superb coordination and the stamina of 10 ordinary men. In four years, he was champion of the world.

Tilden had no doubts about how good he was. He was the best, and he knew it. But as his nephew, William Tatem Tilden III, put it, "he never grew up." He was most comfortable with children and young teens. He coached a long succession of young boy proteges. He was a homosexual, but none of his proteges, all heterosexual, said he ever made any advances on them. In his glory years, people who knew Tilden thought he was asexual.

As champion, Tilden struck people as being unusually straitlaced, although given to frequent tantrums. He wrote hokey short stories extolling good sportsmanship and similarly moralistic plays, all of which flopped. He acted, too, in his own plays and those of recognized play-wrights. He adored actors and wanted to be one, but he always overacted. His lifestyle, especially his demeanor on the tennis court, was too dramatic for the stage.

Tilden feuded continually with the United States Lawn Tennis Association over expenses and other matters. In 1931, he decided to become professional.

Additional topics

- [Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 1949 - Out Of The Closet](#)
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Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 & 1949

Out Of The Closet

Gradually, his fabulous stamina began to ebb. Opponents with less skill could wear him out. Tennis fans eventually said he was "still the best player in the world for one set." As his game faded, his homosexuality came to the fore. He began to solicit boys—but never his proteges—he met on tours. At first he kept his sexual activities tightly in the closet. He cut off contact with his nephew and namesake because the younger man learned of his sexual orientation.

But as he got older and his game fell off, Tilden's homosexuality became more overt. Colleagues recognized it. As his reputation grew, clubs began to bar Tilden. Other players shunned him. He moved to California, where he still had friends among the movie elite. Charlie Chaplin, Errol Flynn, and other stars flocked around him.

Additional topics

- [Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 1949 - Tilden Arrested](#)
- [Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 1949 - An Unlikely Champion](#)
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Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 & 1949

Tilden Arrested

On November 23, 1946, two police officers in Beverly Hills saw a car driving erratically. The driver appeared to be an underage boy. An older man had his arm around him. When the officers pulled the car over, the man hurriedly changed places with the boy. The boy's fly was open. The police arrested Bill Tilden.

Tilden was numb from shock. He signed a confession without even looking at it. When he recovered, he asked for a lawyer. He wanted Jerry Giesler, who had achieved fame by defending Charlie Chaplin and Errol Flynn in suits resulting from their sexual escapades. Giesler wanted no part of him: he defended only heterosexual predators. Tilden finally engaged Richard Maddox, a young former prosecutor.

Maddox had a hard time convincing Tilden that he was in serious trouble. Maddox pointed out that the scandal sheets and rumor mongers would have a field day imagining tennis parties at the Chaplin estate—orgies with the Communist Little Tramp and "In Like" Flynn seducing the little girls while Queer Bill seduced the little boys.

The state's case was weak, the lawyer said. If Tilden repudiated his statement, the only evidence would be the boy's statement. The boy, a precociously dissolute 14-year-old, had been expelled from several schools because of his sexual activities and general delinquency. If Tilden pleaded not guilty, Maddox said, the boy's parents would not want him to testify. And they had said they didn't want Tilden to go to jail.

Tilden refused to plead not guilty. He said he must accept responsibility. "He was hung up on the sportsman thing," Maddox said later.

And Tilden was still convinced that with his celebrity and his famous friends he would get no more than a tongue-lashing and a fine. Dr. J. Paul De River, a psychiatrist who examined Tilden, told the court he was "impulsively weak ... passive autistic with egocentric traits... in need of special psychiatric care." He said, "Any jail sentence would of necessity be limited and would not tend to work as a curative measure, and would probably bring ... more harm." He concluded, "He is ... in some ways quite juvenile.... This man should be regarded as someone who is mentally ill."

De River believed Tilden suffered from "an endocrine dysfunction so often seen during the evolutionary stage of life when the sex curve is on the decline."

Even District Attorney William Ritzi said later, "The poor man was a sick individual. We realized it then, and we realize it now. It's just that society treats it differently today than in those days."

At the sentencing hearing, Tilden compounded his trouble by lying to the judge. He said he had never been involved in a situation like this before. Judge A. A. Scott, like almost everybody in Beverly Hills, knew better. He sentenced Tilden to a year in jail. Tilden was so stunned Maddox had to lift him to his feet.

De River was right. Jail was no cure. Tilden was released after serving seven and a half months. Less than a year and a half later, he was arrested for groping a 16-year-old hitchhiker. He was sentenced to another year, but he got out after about 10 months. Shortly before he was released, American sportswriters voted him the greatest athlete of the half century.

Few others honored him. Chaplin had gone home to England and was barred from returning. Almost all Tilden's other acquaintances avoided him. Mentally, he was rapidly disintegrating. He stopped bathing and changing his clothes. When he visited Maddox, the lawyer's secretary complained that his odor was unbearable.

Tilden would not concede that he was finished. Sixty years old, sick and out of shape, he persuaded a former pupil to give him money for the trip to Cleveland for the U.S. Professional Tennis Championships. The day before he was to enter one more championship tournament, he dropped dead.

—*William Weir*

Suggestions for Further Reading

"Big Bill," *Time* (June 15, 1953).

Deford, Frank. *Big Bil/Tilden: The Triumphs and the Tragedy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976.

Tilden, William Tatem 11. *My Story*. New York: Hellman, Williams, 1948.

Additional topics

- [Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 1949 - Out Of The Closet](#)
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Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 & 1949

An Unlikely Champion, Out Of The Closet, Tilden Arrested

Defendant: William Tatem Tilden 11

Crime Charged: Contributing to the delinquency of a minor

Chief Defense Lawyer: Richard Maddox

Chief Prosecutor: William Ritzi

Judge: A. A. Scott

Place: Los Angeles, California

Dates of Trials: January 16, 1947; February 10, 1949

Verdicts: Guilty

Sentences: One year in jail each time

SIGNIFICANCE: Bill Tilden was one of the greatest tennis player who ever lived. He consorted with movie stars and kings. But toward the end of his career, he was arrested for having sex with a 14-year-old boy. The conviction destroyed him. Apart from the tragedy of a man who climbed the heights and dropped to the depths, both by his own efforts, the case illustrates the folly of not listening to one's lawyer.

It was 1920 at Wimbledon, and the world championship tennis matches were under way. The U.S. team's hopes for a world championship vanished when Little Bill Johnston, a 5'8" giant killer, was eliminated. That left Big Bill Tilden to meet the champion, Gerald Patterson of Australia. The University of Pennsylvania tennis team had rejected Tilden while he was a student there. He had improved since then, but he was 27, almost over-the-hill for a player in those days. The year before, Johnston had beaten him in straight sets.

In the Tilden-Patterson match, the Aussie started strong. He won the first set 6-2. The players changed sides and Tilden noticed a friend, actress Peggy Wood. He nodded slightly to signal that all was well, then he swept the next three sets. Tilden liked to give the crowd a good show. He had been playing with Patterson as a cat plays with a mouse. The Manchester Guardian's tennis correspondent wrote that, "the Philadelphian made rather an exhibition of his opponent."

After winning the world championship, Tilden utterly dominated amateur tennis until he turned professional in 1931. In 1950, American sportswriters voted him the most outstanding athlete in the first half of the century. He won over the likes of Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Red Grange, Bobby Jones, and Johnny Weismuller. He received more than twice as many votes as his nearest rival.

Additional topics

- [Brief for Appellants - Appeal From The United States District Court For The District Of Kansasbrief For Appellants, Questions Presented - In the Supreme Court of the United States October Term \(1952\), OPINION BELOW, JURISDICTION](#)
- [Bernard J. Lotka and Tillie Michalski Trials: 1943 - Child Of A Secret Relationship, Baby's Body Found At Motor Court, Both Parents Face Death Penalty](#)
- [Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 1949 - An Unlikely Champion](#)
- [Bill Tilden Trials: 1947 1949 - Out Of The Closet](#)
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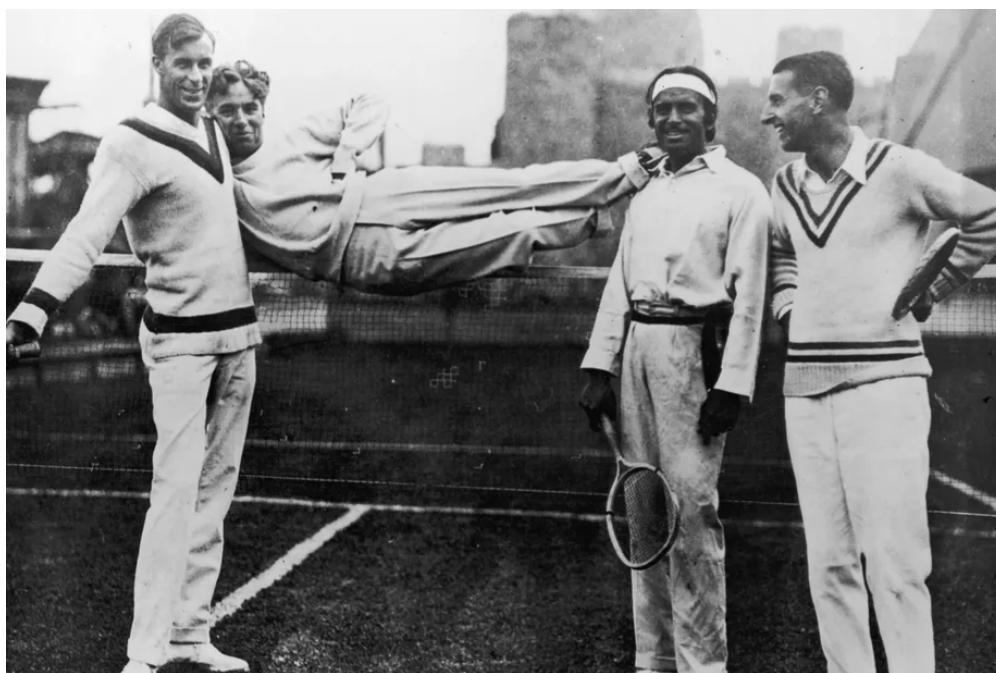
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Bill Tilden: The flawed life of a gay tennis icon

Tilden was a superstar in his sport in the 1920s, but being gay was different then. He died alone and largely forgotten amid scandal.

By [John Carvalho](#) | Jun 24, 2014, 12:14am PDT



From left, Bill Tilden, actors Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and Spanish tennis player Manuel Alonso in 1923. | FPG/Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

As Wimbledon commences, viewers and readers will be entertained by inspiring stories of champions who overcame tragedy or heartbreak to raise the silver cup or plate. Condemned to the shadows, however, are those who reversed the journey, descending from triumph to shame and obscurity.

Within that roll rests Bill Tilden, three-time Wimbledon champion (1920, 1921, 1930). His homosexuality was known but not discussed during the 1920s, the decade he dominated tennis. But when he died in 1953, he was shadowed by two jail terms for sexual activities involving underage boys.

Even before his arrest, Tilden had been consigned to the shadows. An icon like Babe Ruth – whose peccadilloes were protected by the New York sports media – could be celebrated until his death. But for Tilden, whose tennis primacy during the Jazz Age 1920s was followed by a retirement during a much more conservative and moralistic era, the celebrations were few.

After he was arrested in November 1946 and January 1949, the story was over, for most sportswriters and fans. Tilden would die alone in June 1953. The Associated Press would vote him the top tennis player of the first half of the 20th century, but it seemed more of a sad contrast with what Tilden's life had become.

But he didn't go away quietly. Rare among athletes of his time, Tilden actually wrote a statement about his sexual identity. Between his two arrests, in 1948, he published an autobiography, "My Story." Toward the end of the book, in only two pages (pp. 307-309), Tilden addressed the issue.

The idea seems an act of public relations suicide seen only in the age of Twitter. But Tilden was as confident in his writing abilities as he was in his serve as a player. He was not a child tennis prodigy who became a world champion; Tilden in fact entered the tennis spotlight relatively late, in his mid-20s. Before then, he was a writer and reporter for the Philadelphia Evening Ledger. At his tennis peak, he successfully syndicated his articles to newspapers and magazines, earning \$25,000 a year.

Tilden did not use a ghostwriter in the 1920s; nor did he use one here. The words are his own, and he never lacked confidence in his ability to get himself out of trouble – whether on Center Court or the front page. He believed he could take on society's hostility toward his homosexuality as successfully as he dispatched opponents, even down match point.

The result, however, was not nearly as successful. Courageously for a gay man in postwar America, Tilden starts by acknowledging his "condition" and claims, "History further demonstrates that in frequent instances creative, useful and even great human beings have known such relationships." He even speculates that homosexuality would be more likely within athletics, given its emphasis on "physical perfection." He boldly states, "Greater tolerance and wider education on the part of the general public concerning this form of sex relationship is one of the crying needs."

Those comments, however, are followed by a change in rhetorical strategy, in which Tilden seems to adopt the rhetoric of his age. He uses terms like "condition" and refers to a "psychoneurosis or other psychological disturbance" that he blames for his act. Rather than "degeneracy," he refers to "an illness; in most cases a psychological illness."

But was he referring to his homosexuality, or the situation that led to his arrest?

Unfortunately, it's difficult to distinguish from his writing. Throughout the section that follows this one in the book, Tilden's description of his first imprisonment call to mind the "rehab" current celebrities seek when caught in moral or personal humiliation. He declared himself refreshed and ready to resume his life and tennis.

This part of his autobiography leaves the reader confused. But sadly, throughout his life, Tilden was not as good a writer as he fancied. When the topic was tennis, he wrote with a flair that engaged his reader. But his forays into fiction and drama were much less successful. As Frank DeFord noted in his excellent biography, "His tennis fiction was forced and trite, but his writings about the playing of the game, however technical, read smoothly and even with a certain grace." Like most athletes, Tilden squandered his money, but in his case the money was lavished on productions of his own plays, which closed quickly.

In this case, as well, his contradictory approach would leave the reader confused. Likely his editors would be reluctant to work too hard at cleaning up the section, leaving it to Tilden and his tortured prose. But even within the section you can still see his center court combativeness, challenging the reader to confront a culture and phenomenon that would emerge defiantly in the coming decades.

In reviewing the book, Time magazine avoided the topic of sexual identity, but allowed itself thinly veiled jabs at Tilden. The brief review was titled "Catty Reminisces," and focused on

Tilden's uncomplimentary remarks toward contemporaries and more recent players. The reviewer dismissed him as "an arrogant and unblushing showoff" and particularly noted Tilden's "cattiest" description of Suzanne Lenglen, one of the top women players of the 1920s: "Her costume struck me as a cross between a prima donna's and that of a street walker."

The review concluded with Tilden's plea that, even approaching age 60, he was ready to embark on another pro tour, "if the public will have me." But the public and the tennis establishment would have none of Tilden. In his hometown of Philadelphia, he was expelled from the Germantown Cricket Club, and the University of Pennsylvania removed his name from the alumni files. When friends discovered his body in his small Southern California apartment, his bags were packed and he was ready to leave for a tennis exhibition – his life and his sporting career ending together.

Tilden might not draw much attention during this year's Wimbledon. In fairness, he skipped the tournament between 1922 and 1926, though three wins in six tries left him with an overall singles record of 31-3, winning more than 90% of his matches. His record in what is now the U.S. Open (seven titles) and Davis Cup were even more impressive.

But in today's sports culture, as more high-profile athletes come out, it provides another reason to revisit Bill Tilden – a champion who, both in his playing style and lifestyle – was born too soon, discussed sexual identity too early, and has been buried too deeply for too long.

***John Carvalho** is an associate professor of journalism at Auburn University and a sports media historian. He discusses sports media issues on Twitter at @johncarvalhoau. This article is adapted from an article he and an Auburn colleague, Dr. Michael Milford, wrote for a special issue of the journal *Sport in History* on sporting icons. He is indebted to Dr. Milford for his insights into Tilden's explanation of his sexual identity.*



RACQUETS IN THIS COLLECTION

THE WINNER

ALL RACQUETS IN THIS COLLECTION

HALL OF FAMERS IN THIS COLLECTION

BILL CLOTHIER

BILL TILDEN

BILL JOHNSTON

MOLLA MALLORY

HELEN HULL JACOBS

OVERALL DIMENSIONS

27×9.125 in

HEAD SIZE

76.5 in²

GRIP SIZE

5.125 inIMPERIAL ☒ METRIC

HALL OF FAMERS IN THIS COLLECTION

BILL CLOTHIER

BILL TILDEN

BILL JOHNSTON

MOLLA MALLORY

HELEN HULL JACOBS

OVERALL DIMENSIONS

27×9.125 in

HEAD SIZE

76.5 in²

GRIP SIZE

5.125 inIMPERIAL ☒ METRIC

“THE WINNER” TENNIS RACQUET USED BY BILL TILDEN AT THE 1922 U.S. NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

This racquet was used by Tilden in the 1922 U.S. National Men's Singles Championship victory over Bill Johnston. Tilden won at the Germantown Cricket Club in Philadelphia, 4-6, 3-6, 6-2, 6-3, 6-4.

Wooden tennis racquet with no strings. The racquet has an elongated oval head and the Bancroft-patented design of a thin dark leather layer between the wood layers is visible. The wedge is concave and is attached to the throat with one metal screw. The handle is thick with a faceted and grooved grip. There are two brown shoulder wraps on either side of the head and a narrow leather band around the base of the handle. The leather butt-plate is partially disintegrated.

Gift of Alexander Wiener, 1959

MAKER

F.J. BANCROFT CO. (AMERICAN)

DATE

1922

FRAME

WOOD, LEATHER

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USED BY
BILL TILDEN



RACQUETS IN THIS COLLECTION

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HALL OF FAMERS IN THIS COLLECTION

BILL CLOTHIER

BILL TILDEN

BILL JOHNSTON

MOLLA MALLORY

HELEN HULL JACOBS

OVERALL DIMENSIONS

27×9.125 in

HEAD SIZE

76.5 in²

GRIP SIZE

5.125 in

CLOSE

Bill Tilden is shown here holding an armful of Spalding "Top Flite" tennis racquets outside of a train at Queen Lane Station in Germantown, Pennsylvania, ca. 1930.
Photo Credit: ITHF Collection



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Biography of Bill Tilden

Bill Tilden

Name: Bill Tilden**Bith Date:** February 10, 1893**Death Date:** June 5, 1953**Place of Birth:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States of America**Nationality:** American**Gender:** Male**Occupations:** tennis player

Bill Tilden (1893-1953), known as "Big Bill" and "Gentleman Bill," was the first American tennis player to compete at Wimbledon--and the first American winner. During the 1920s, he was undefeated for seven years. His book *The Art of Tennis* is still regarded as a classic in the game. "In the 1920s and 1930s," wrote Kim Shanley on tennisonline.com, "Bill Tilden was to tennis what Babe Ruth was to baseball."

William Tatem Tilden Jr. was born on February 10, 1893, in Philadelphia, the son of wealthy parents. His childhood was marked by tragedy. Before he was born, three older siblings died within two weeks of each other in a diphtheria epidemic, in 1884. His parents had two more children: Tilden and his brother Herbert. When Tilden was 15, his mother contracted Bright's disease and was confined to a wheelchair. His father, who was considering a campaign for mayor of Philadelphia, was rarely home. When Tilden was 18, his mother died; three years later his father died from a kidney infection; a few months later his beloved brother Herbert died of pneumonia. At age 22, Tilden was the only survivor of a once-large family.

After the deaths, Tilden left the University of Pennsylvania and went to live with his mother's sister, Betsy Hey, and her niece, Selina. He was encouraged to resume playing tennis by Selina, who considered the game to be a form of therapy for his grief. Tilden did go back to the game and, within five years, was a world-ranked player. During his amateur period, he won 138 of 192 tournaments, and his match record was 907-62. In 1920, at the age of 27, Tilden was the first American to win a tournament at Wimbledon, in England.

In the 1920s, Tilden dominated the sport of tennis, winning seven U.S. championships, the equivalent to today's U.S. Open. He was a finalist at the U.S. Open ten times, and also won five men's doubles and four mixed doubles there. Tilden won at Wimbledon two more times, in 1921 and 1930. In addition, he won 13 straight singles matches in the Davis Cup from 1920 until 1926. In 1925, Tilden won 57 games in a row--a feat that biographer Frank Deford wrote was "one of those rare, unbelievable athletic feats--like Johnny Unitas throwing touchdown passes in 47 straight games or Joe DiMaggio hitting safety in 56 games in a row--that simply cannot be exceeded in a reasonable universe no matter how long and loud we intone that records are made to be broken."

A Cerebral Player and a Flamboyant Performer

Tilden was known for his style, grace, and commanding manner, as well as for his cannonball serve, which was once clocked at 151 miles per hour. In addition to his grace and power, he was also famous for his

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cerebral approach to the game. Unlike many other sports champions, who can't explain how they do what they do or why they excel, Tilden loved to think and write about the physical, emotional, and mental traits of a champion. According to Shanley, Tilden wrote: "The game is a science and an art. It can reach its highest expression only if a player is willing to study and practice in an attempt to master the game in all its varied facets." Tilden also told tennis students that it would take them 20 lessons before they could even begin to play and six months of lessons before they would even begin to have fun playing. "Anyone who promises quicker results is either an optimist, a miracle worker, or a liar," he wrote. He believed that, because of its technical challenges, tennis is by its very nature a very difficult sport to play. "In the range of sporting activities," he wrote, "successfully hitting a tennis ball back over the net and into the prescribed area on the other side (given the whole range of variables, including ball speed and spin, body movement, and wind and sun) is an inherently difficult task." And, he wrote, "Remember that in first-class tournament tennis, 70 percent of all points end in error, a net or an out, and only 30 percent end in winning placements or service aces."

Tilden was a strategist, advising players, "The primary object in match tennis is to break up the other man's game. The first thought that you should have, when you step onto a court for a match, is 'What are my opponent's weaknesses? Where will he miss next?'" He also believed in appreciating the past, writing in his 1923 book *How to Play Better Tennis*, "There are some very valuable things of the past that have been lost in the wild scramble for speed and power. These should be recovered and brought back into the repertoire of the modern player. The champion of today owes his game to the champions of yesterday, just as he will add his bit to the champion of tomorrow." In addition, he wrote, "The wise student should learn all he can about the styles and methods of the great players of the past, every bit as much as he does of the players of the present."

Tilden knew his opponents well, and often toyed with them, playing to the crowds. In *Famous Tennis Players*, Trent Frayne quoted sportswriter Allison Danzig, who wrote, "To win the crowds to his side, he went to lengths that bordered on lunacy. He would allow his opponents to gain so big a lead as to make his own defeat appear inevitable. Then, from this precarious position, he would launch a spectacular comeback that had the crowd cheering him and that invariably ended with an ovation from the stands when he won." Despite these stunts, he made a point of being fair. If an official incorrectly made a call that unfairly favored Tilden, he often deliberately missed his next shot in order to restore fairness to the game. In the Davis Cup, he once allowed Australian, James Anderson, to win a whole set in order to make up for a bad call that had wrongly given Tilden a set point.

In addition to being a flamboyant tennis performer, Tilden also was deeply interested in the theater. When he inherited \$30,000, he used the money to produce *Dracula*, with himself in the title role. The show ran for sixteen weeks, but was a disaster. He also wrote fiction, in addition to his tennis books; Frayne described the books as "droopy novels usually inveighing against the evils of alcohol, which he personally abhorred."

In 1922, Tilden lost part of his finger in an accident. He simply modified his grip and continued to play at the same level he had played at before the accident.

Clashed with Officials

Tilden disliked authority and frequently came into conflict with officials of the United States Lawn Tennis Association (USLTA). In one famous clash, described by Frayne, Tilden was scheduled to play doubles in the Davis Cup finals of 1927, with Frank T. Hunter as his partner. The team had already won Wimbledon and Forest Hills but, for unknown reasons, on the morning of the match the officials changed their minds and declared that Dick Williams would be his partner. Tilden was annoyed by their high-handed manner. "Splendid," he told them. "I'll be playing bridge in the clubhouse. When you've regained your sanity, come and advise me." Tilden calmly went and played bridge, impervious to the demands, threats, and pleadings of officials; at one point, he asked them to stop interrupting his game. Out on the court, a sellout crowd was noisily demanding to see Tilden play. The officials gave in and Tilden played-after he finished playing his hand. And he won the set, though he lost the Davis Cup for that year.

In 1928, the officials were still annoyed with his attitude. They decreed that he would be suspended from amateur competition and would not be allowed to play in the Davis Cup challenge round between the United States and France. Technically, amateurs were not allowed to make money from their sport, and Tilden was well known for writing articles on tennis for various publications. Although he had been doing this for many years, officials had always ignored it. Now, they suspended him for six months. What they had not considered was the effect of Tilden's fans.

All the seats for the Davis Cup matches in Paris were sold out. When the French heard that Tilden would not be playing in their new Roland Garros Stadium, they sent diplomats to ask Calvin Coolidge, then president of the United States, to allow Tilden to play. The president told the American ambassador in Paris to disregard the U.S. Davis Cup team captain, and to select Tilden for the team. Tilden could be suspended after the match--which he won.

Tragic End to a Great Career

Tilden's fame led him to have many famous friends, particularly movie stars. He moved to Hollywood and coached many of them in tennis, including Greta Garbo, Katharine Hepburn, and Tallulah Bankhead. He also became good friend with Charlie Chaplin. Tilden played at Chaplin's tennis parties, where he coached Errol Flynn, Joseph Cotten, Montgomery Clift, Spencer Tracy, and Olivia deHavilland.

Although Tilden is widely considered to be the greatest tennis player of all time, his life story is also the most tragic. Tilden was gay, in an era when homosexuality was not tolerated. He was arrested, convicted, and put in jail twice for homosexual encounters. When this became public knowledge, he was no longer allowed to enter tennis clubs or to play on the professional circuit. By the end of his life, his former friends had abandoned him. Some of them literally turned their backs when he approached. The officials at Penn removed his name from their alumni files. The Germantown Cricket Club, where he had won many of his Davis Cup matches, removed his pictures from their walls. The same happened at Forest Hills, where to this day there is only one photograph of him on the wall.

Friendless and penniless, Tilden had to pawn his old trophies, and lived in a sparse rented room near Hollywood and Vine. On June 5, 1953, he died of a heart attack in West Hollywood, California. He was alone, and his rackets were found beside his bed, packed and ready to go to the 1953 U.S. Championships.

Although his friends turned their backs on him, his reputation as a tennis player endured. Tilden won the National Sports Writers Association "Most Outstanding Athlete of the Year" award in 1949, with ten times the number of votes of the nearest runner-up.

In *The Story of the Davis Cup*, Alan Trengrove quotes John Kieran as saying, "Big Bill was more than a monarch. He was a great artist and a great actor. He combed his dark hair with an air. He strode the courts like a confident conqueror. He rebuked the crowds at tournaments and sent critical officials scurrying to cover. He carved up his opponents as a royal chef would carve meat to the king's taste. He had a fine flair for the dramatic; and, with his vast height and reach and boundless zest and energy over a span of years, he was the most striking and commanding figure the game of tennis had ever put on court."

Twenty-three years after Tilden died, writer Frank Deford visited his small, modest tombstone, and according to Frayne, wrote, "It is the only monument of any kind anywhere in the world--at Forest Hills, Wimbledon, Germantown, anywhere--that pays tribute to the greatest tennis player who ever lived."

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William T. Tilden (1893–1953)

SEE RANK

Writer | Actor

William T. Tilden was born on February 10, 1893 in Germantown, Pennsylvania, USA as William Tatem Tilden II. He was a writer and actor, known for [The Highbinders](#) (1926), [The Ford Television Theatre](#) (1952) and [Footlights Theater](#) (1952). He died on June 4, 1953 in Los Angeles, California, USA. [See full bio »](#)

Born: [February 10, 1893](#) in [Germantown, Pennsylvania, USA](#)

Died: [June 4, 1953](#) (age 60) in [Los Angeles, California, USA](#)

Photos



[5 photos »](#)

Known For



[The Highbinders](#)
Writer
(1926)



[The Ford Television Theatre](#)
Writer
(1953)



[Footlights Theater](#)
Writer
(1953)



[The Music Master](#)
Joles
(1927)

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Writer (3 credits)	Hide
Footlights Theater (TV Series) (1 episode) - They Also Serve (1953)	1953
The Ford Television Theatre (TV Series) (story - 1 episode) - They Also Serve (1953) ... (story)	1953
The Highbinders (story)	1926
Actor (1 credit)	Hide
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Sport's Golden Age (Short) Self	1948

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Hollywood Without Make-Up (Documentary) Self	1963
When Sports Were King (Documentary short) Self - Tennis Champion (as 'Big Bill' Tilden)	1954

Personal Details

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Publicity Listings: 2 Print Biographies | 3 Articles | 1 Magazine Cover Photo | [See more](#) »

Alternate Names: William T. Tilden II | 'Big Bill' Tilden | Bill Tilden

Height: 6' 2" (1.88 m)

Did You Know?

Edit

Trivia: Won professional singles championship, 1931 & 1935. [See more](#) »

Nickname: Big Bill

Star Sign: [Aquarius](#)

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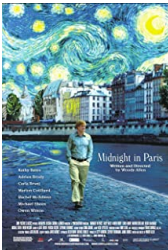
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